

# Support for the Portion of the Sociometer that Operates within Conscious Awareness

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## ABSTRACT

The current study focused on contribution to the Sociometer theory by exploring the portion of the sociometer that operates within conscious awareness. The researcher gathered information regarding the lived experience of young adults' engagement in binge drinking to increase self-esteem and social acceptance using a qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA). A purposive sample of five female college students ages of 22-24 meeting inclusions criteria *via* researcher developed screening was recruited. Data was collected *via* face-to-face, semi-structured interviews that were then transcribed, member-checked, and analyzed according to IPA methodology. Themes included: Low self-esteem led to binge drinking; causes and effects of binging behavior were cyclical in nature; there was a conscious awareness of the relationship between self-esteem and relational value; there was a conscious awareness of the cognitive processes regarding attempts to increase self-esteem. These findings have expanded upon the existing research regarding SMT to shed light on the portion of the sociometer that operates within conscious awareness. The participants' descriptions of their lived experiences provided evidence supporting the conscious awareness of the relationship between self-esteem and relational value which supports existence of the conscious portion of the sociometer that motivates behavior in response to low self-esteem signaling decreased relational value.

**Keywords:** Sociometer; Alcohol; low self-esteem; Humans; Young adulthood

## INTRODUCTION

Humans have an innate need to belong [1]. As humans, we live in a social world that often requires interaction with groups of others [2]. Individuals pursue opportunities for social interaction to fulfill their belongingness needs; if the needs are thwarted, the individual's health and well-being may suffer [1,3]. While failure to fulfill such needs is associated with negative outcomes both physical and psychological, for the individual, threats to such needs may lead to emotional distress that motivates a person to seek need fulfillment [3,4]. Experiencing social rejection, a sense of failure, or embarrassment may endanger belongingness needs, and when this happens, a drop in levels of self-esteem may occur [5,6].

Young adulthood is a time in which individuals experience increased focus on social relations and one's own relational value [7-12]. Young adults may try to form social bonds by conforming to their peers to gain positive social experiences, increase personal

confidence, or to cope with the concern of isolation [7,8]. While it may appear that behavior an attempt of maintaining or increasing self-esteem; this behavior is actually an attempt protect or even boost one's relational value [3,13-15]. People will continue to attempt to have their needs met to increase relational value [3].

## Sociometer theory

The present study was based on the Socio-Meter Theory (SMT), a pertinent self-esteem theory [6,16]. SMT theorizes that humans possess an internal system that continually examines the individual's social surroundings to note change in one's relational value [6]. In this system, self-esteem is the gauge, or the sociometer that signals these changes [6]. Elevated relational value increases the probability of social inclusion, support and protection [6]. The changes that signal the potential of losing such innately important provisions causes self-esteem to decrease, which may lead a person to seek social acceptance [6]. Accordingly, people are driven to

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increase acceptance and therefore their relational value in response to a signal that it is low or declining, indicated by the sociometer rather than to increase self-esteem for the sake of itself [6]. SMT offers that belongingness needs motivate the maintenance of relational value [5,6]. Changes in relational value are signaled by changes in self-esteem that prompt the engagement in conformity behaviors to increase relational value [6, 16-19]. According to SMT, the necessity for self-esteem is essentially the need to avoid social exclusion; levels of self-esteem may decrease not only in response to the experience of social rejection but also if the perception of decreased relational value, indicating the impact of the individual's perception of relational value [6]. As a result, behaviors to maintain or increase self-esteem are actually aimed at increasing interpersonal acceptance to enhance relational value [6]. Therefore, people are not concerned with protecting self-esteem itself but use self-esteem as a gauge to increase levels of social acceptance [6].

Empirical applications of SMT boast findings that support the main tenet of SMT, namely the premise that rejection leads to decreases in self-esteem and social acceptance leads to increases in self-esteem, however a distinction must be added, suggesting that actual social acceptance impacts one's self-perception of social acceptance indicating that conscious awareness impacts the building and maintenance of self-esteem [16]. There is a lack of empirical analysis regarding this portion of the sociometer as it impacts behavior [16,20]. This study aimed to further develop the SMT to provide a more thorough understanding of binge drinking as it was related to self-esteem and social acceptance in young adults to increase the understanding of the portion of the sociometer that operates within conscious awareness. Currently, there is not a clear understanding of the portion of the sociometer that operates within the individual's conscious awareness to impact one's behavior [16,20]. One recent study Gorsuch Bainter and Ackerman, found young adults that reported experiencing thwarted belongingness as well as self-perceived low relational value chose to engage in binge drinking to conform to be more like their peers to try to increase self-esteem and relational value. The present study sought to expand upon the findings of Gorsuch Bainter and Ackerman by examining the role of binge drinking on as self-esteem and social acceptance. Exploration was necessary to help understand attempts to increase self-esteem and ultimately relational value in the young adult population [16,20]. The purpose of this qualitative study was to extend upon the current empirical understanding of SMT through an exploration the portion of the sociometer that operates within conscious awareness. To contribute to theory, the researcher assessed the lived experience of young adults' binge drinking behavior; namely their attempts to increase social acceptance and self-esteem.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current study focused on contribution to SMT by exploring the portion of the sociometer that operates within conscious awareness. This required an appreciation of the young adults' lived experience of attempting to increase their self-esteem and social acceptance by choosing to binge drink to conform to their peers. A qualitative phenomenological approach selected as it would allow for researcher to gather descriptions of the lived experience of binge drinking as a conformity behavior as it relates to self-esteem and social acceptance. A prevailing advantage of this approach to research is that it allowed for an understanding of lived experience from the inside of the participants' subjective experiences resulting

in an increased understanding of the lived experience of these young adults [21]. A major strength of this approach is that it described and interpreted the nature of lived experience in a rich and thorough way, thus providing thorough descriptions and interpretations of the portion of the sociometer that operates within conscious awareness [21].

The model of phenomenology that was used in the present work is the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) introduced by Smith. The essential focus of IPA is to contribute to the field through a greater understanding of existing research, thus it is the best fit to contribute to SMT through a greater understanding of the existing research regarding the theory. Within IPA, the researcher's role is to put themselves in the participant's place and ask critical questions of the participant's words while remaining cognizant that there is no direct relationship between what the participant expresses and what they experience. The current study sought to gain an understanding of how the young adults make sense of and assign meaning to binge drinking as it relates to their social cognition, namely, thoughts associated with self-esteem and social acceptance through an exploration of the lived experience. IPA operates with the understanding that human psychological research involves a double interpretation of meaning in that the participant is attempting to make sense of experiences while the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant that is trying to make sense of experiences.

A purposive sample was drawn from a pool of individuals within the age range of 18 years to 24 years old who volunteered to participate in the study. The study was advertised on a flyer in an academic building of a Midwest university, a local coffee shop and on public Facebook pages. Those who expressed interest in participation by contacting the researcher were given appointments to complete screening measures. The goal of the use of this purposive sample is homogeneity within the sample by choosing participants within the age range of 18 years to 24 years that disclosed the experience of thwarted belongingness needs, self-perceived low relational value and conformity tendency in their alcohol consumption. The sample size consisted of five participants, based on the suggested sample size suggested by Smith and Osborn as it allows for detailed engagement with each participant as well as in-depth examination of similarities, differences, convergence and divergence in the data.

The criteria for eligibility were determined using a screening measure developed by the researcher. This measure was based on existing literature; screening for thwarted belongingness, self-perceived low relational value and alcohol consumption conformity. Evidence suggests that humans possess a desire to be emotionally close to those that they feel are important and may attempt to avoid feeling lonely by attempting to get close to those around them [21]. Having negative social experiences could leave a person feeling as if their belongingness needs are at risk of not being met and a sense of loneliness can occur even when one is in close physical proximity to others if that individual feels emotionally isolated [2,4,5,21,22]. With this considered, the researcher created two questions to screen for thwarted belongingness by inquiring about the individual's sense of loneliness and satisfaction in relationships. In order to meet minimum criteria for inclusion on this segment, the participant must have answered either affirmative to the first question or negative to the second question. Those answering both affirmative to the first question and negative to the second question were also included. The individuals also met minimum criteria for inclusion on the other two segments as well to be included in the

sample.

The second section of the screening tool sought to explore self-perceived low relational value. Existing evidence posits that an individual's perceived relational value is an estimation of the extent to which they feel valued by others [6,24]. Given this information, the researcher crafted one question asking about a person's sense that they are valued in their relationships to screen for self-perceived low relational value. Answering "yes" to this question in this segment qualified the individual for inclusion. The individual must also have met the minimum criteria for inclusion on the other two segments as well to be included in the sample.

The third and final portion of the screening tool developed by the researcher screened for alcohol consumption conformity. Based on existing data, an individual's attitudes and behaviors can be influenced by their perception of social norms, and when this occurs, it is referred to as conformity [25]. Conformity to group norms can be seen as an attempt to gain acceptance and social approval [15,26,27]. Those in the young adult population report that they endeavor to establish social connections with their peers by matching their behavior to gain positive social experiences, increase personal confidence, to be perceived positively or attempt to deal with concerns of social isolation [7,8].

Individuals are motivated to have their belongingness needs by conforming and to increase the chances of social approval to increase relational value [10,12,27]. Research indicates that conformity is demonstrated by various behaviors, including the use of alcohol [25]. Those individuals who report engaging in greater amounts of binge drinking behavior also report an increased tendency to engage in comparisons between themselves and others and an increased likelihood for conformity [9]. The researcher created two questions to assess conformity in alcohol consumption to increase social acceptance, inclusion and to be perceived positively by others. Answering "yes" to any one question or both questions in this segment qualified the individual for inclusion. The individual must also meet minimum criteria for inclusion on the other two segments as well to be included in the sample.

Additionally, the sample also was willing to participate with an audio recorded interview and proficient in English. The sample consisted of five participants ranging between 22 years and 24 years old (mean of 22.8); three participants were Caucasian, one participant was African American, and participant was Hispanic. The sample consisted of only female participants.

Though five males took part in the screening, none of them qualified for inclusion. Though being currently enrolled in a university was not an inclusion requirement; all five of the participants were currently enrolled in a local four-year university; three participants were undergraduate status and two were graduate status.

Participants who qualified took part in a semi-structured interview that consisted of a small number of questions for main themes for discussion. Gathering information regarding the lived experience of the young adults *via* interviews also allowed for greater depth and breadth of information to be gathered to allow for data saturation to be achieved increasing the validity of the results. Prompt themes regarding the lived experience of self-esteem, the participant's experience of their own relational value, the participant's affect and thoughts associated with binge drinking as well as self-esteem and relational value, the nature of their binge drinking behavior, and the participant's reflection on the function of the binge drinking behavior were explored. These prompt themes were selected as

answers to these themes provided a greater understanding of the individual's lived experience in regard to internal cognitive processes associated with self-esteem and binge drinking behavior to shed light on the conscious portion of the sociometer within SMT. Field testing was performed by y three experts to ensure the questions were suitable. The researcher conducted interviews according to conditions outlined by Smith and Osborn. The interview format was adaptable as the researcher allowed the participants' thoughts and interest to guide the focus of the interview. The interview began with a general question so as to encourage the participant to freely explore the topic. If it was noted that the participant did not understand or provided only a short response, the researcher then prompted in a more specific way. The researcher encouraged the participants to elaborate within their responses but was also sure to avoid leading questions as well as value-laden terms or phrasing. The interviews were audio recorded in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. The researcher conducted preliminary analyses to determine if data saturation had occurred after each interview. Upon the confirmation that thick and rich information had been collected *via* the interviews so that no new information or themes were uncovered and no additional coding was possible, it was determined that data saturation was reached.

## RESULTS

Data processing and analysis was conducted utilizing the IPA methodology as described by Smith; which consisted of four stages. In the first stage, the data was processed exploring the transcription of the interview. The researcher noted pauses, mistakes and speech dynamics evident in the transcription [28]. An idiographic analysis of each transcript was done with each audio recorded interview before moving on to the next.

The readers read each transcript multiple times while making detailed notes of the significant points in the interview. A separate table was used to interpret notes and identify themes across transcripts [28]. The second step of data analysis consisted of the researcher rereading the transcripts to note themes that captured the important features of the interview in addition to looking for apparent connections between themes [28]. In the third stage, after reading each transcript multiple times the researcher created another table that contained superordinate themes and subthemes from the transcripts in an attempt to provide structure to the analysis by noting clusters of themes [28]. In the fourth stage, a master table of themes was created to identify main superordinate themes; this table also included quotes from the participants' interviews [28]. In the data processing and analysis process, the researcher sought to create structure by connecting related identified themes into common clusters that would create groups of themes and then identifying superordinate categories [28,29]. For triangulation to establish credibility, an additional reader was given clear transcripts and tables of superordinate and subordinate themes. It was established that the researcher and reader had 100% interrater reliability for superordinate and subordinate themes and there was no additional deliberation between the researcher and the additional reader. The software program Dedoose was utilized for data analysis.

### Research question one

The first research question posed by the researcher focused on how the young adults felt that their level of self-esteem related to their behavioral attempts to increase their relational value. It seems from

the present research that a theme of low self-esteem was associated with the binge consumption of alcohol. Additionally, themes of conscious awareness and the cyclical nature of behavior emerged as well.

### Low self-esteem led to binge drinking

Four of the five young adults interviewed within the study indicated that low levels of self-esteem had led to the engagement in the binge consumption of alcohol and that they had consciously chosen to binge drink with the goal of increasing their level of self-esteem. One participant reported that she felt that her lack of self-esteem had “definitely encouraged” her to “fill the empty void with alcohol” and she felt that other young adults behaved similarly in that they would “turn to a bottle like it’s a friend” to “boost” their low levels of self-esteem. A second participant noted that she felt that binge drinking helped her become more confident in social situations and increased her self-esteem when she was with others. She indicated that she believed that low levels of self-esteem “probably impact people to drink more” for the same purpose. Another participant indicated that she felt that her self-esteem did increase and she did gain confidence when she was “drunk” so that if she wanted to feel confident and increase her sense of self-esteem, she would choose to binge drink to achieve that goal. The final participant disclosed that she had multiple experiences when she would choose to engage in binge drinking “in order to boost” her self-esteem so that she was not “thinking about it so much”. She elaborated on her disclosure to share that when she would binge drink she felt she was more accepted by others which helped her to “feel better” about herself and raise her level of self-esteem.

### Causes and effects of bingeing behavior were cyclical in nature

It appears that just as low self-esteem and negative emotionality are reportedly reasons why young adults engage in binge drinking behavior; both of these experiences seem to be consequences of the binges as well. Two of the participants indicated that they were cognizant of the cyclical nature of their incentive to binge being the same as the consequences of their binges. One reported that feelings of sadness led her to want to begin a drinking episode that escalates into a binge. She shared:

“My emotions tend to drive me after a certain point. Like I’ll go into an evening, and even at the bar and alright ‘I’ll go I’m only going to have 2 shots, that’s it’, and then I still start a tab and it will end up being a lot larger than I thought. I feel down and I drink and then I decide I don’t want the party to stop... I just I think the worst part about binge drinking is, uh, I’ve done things that I regret. I have a lot of regrettable experiences, um, I’ve been assaulted and been the victim of a lot of bad instances and you know that leads to depression and then that leads to more drinking. It’s kind of a cycle.”

She cited sadness and regret associated with the cyclical nature of her behavior.

Similarly, another participant noted that if she wanted to feel more confident she would binge drink, but that binge drinking had caused her to gain a substantial amount of weight which had led her have lower levels of self-esteem. She disclosed that she was aware of the cycle in which she would drink to feel better about her appearance but that her appearance was being impacted negatively by the bingeing she was using to cope. She shared:

“I feel like my self-esteem gets like higher like I get more confidence once I um like once I’m drunk and stuff so like if I want to feel confident I’ll drink but then it’s like uh, a really bad cycle because when I drink I gain weight.”

### There was a conscious awareness of the relationship between self-esteem and relational value

A theme of conscious awareness of the relationship between self-esteem and relational value became evident to support the conclusion that the young adults within the present sample were consciously aware of the impact of their self-esteem on behavioral attempts to increase their perceived relational value. Four of the five young adults reported that both their low self-esteem and low relational value was associated with binge drinking behavior. Two of these participants indicated an awareness of the connection between their level of self-esteem and their relational value. In addition to this, there existed some indication of a conscious connection between self-esteem and relational value in the reports of two of the participants.

One of the four disclosed that her low self-esteem led to a feeling that she does not matter as much as others do in relationships. She attributed her perceived low relational value to be a direct result of her low self-esteem. The fourth participant reported that gaining social acceptance when binge drinking increased her perceived relational value and when her relational value increased she felt her self-esteem increased as well. This finding supports newly developing ideas within the existing literature that suggest that individuals’ feelings about themselves are impacted by others’ perceptions of them [16]. Existing literature posits that if self-perceptions are impacted by the perceptions of others, this would serve as support for the concept of conscious awareness of relational value [6,16]. Researchers in the field have proposed this [16], yet existing research findings have yet to definitively support the existence of this conscious awareness [16]. However, the findings of the current study suggest that participants in this study did have a conscious awareness of relational value.

### Research question two

A second research question focused on the young adults’ internal cognitive processes regarding self-esteem and their attempts to increase relational value. The theme of conscious awareness of the relationship between self-esteem and bingeing behavior in that all five participants reported being cognizant of connection between these two concepts within their personal experiences became apparent.

### There was a conscious awareness of the cognitive processes regarding attempts to increase self-esteem

All five of the young adults who participated in the present research indicated an awareness of their internal cognitive processes regarding their self-esteem and either attempts to increase their self-esteem in and of it or to increase their self-esteem by increasing their perceived relational value. Four of the participants indicated that they were aware in the moment that their level of self-esteem led to a conscious choice to binge drink with the aim of increasing self-esteem while the fifth participant reported a retroactive awareness of the connection. This participant reported that prior to our interview, she had never considered that the concepts of self-esteem and binge drinking could be related and that she had

“never really thought this deeply about these kinds of questions” but indicated through our discussion that she had come to believe that young adults could binge drink as a result of low levels of self-esteem. Of those participants who expressed conscious awareness of their cognitive processes regarding the connection between self-esteem and binge drinking, one participant labeled alcohol as a “self-esteem booster” and disclosed that her “lack” of self-esteem “definitely encouraged” her to engage in the binge consumption of alcohol to feel better about herself. Another participant reported being cognizant that her self-esteem and level of “confidence” increased when she was “drunk” so that she reported that when she wanted to feel “confident” she would choose to binge drink alcohol. Another participant reported that she believed that low levels of self-esteem would lead to greater alcohol consumption and she also chose to engage in binge drinking with the aim of feeling more “confident” and increasing her self-esteem. This participant acknowledged a direct connection between binges drinking to increase her self-esteem as well as the connection between her low self-esteem and her low relational value. She went on to express her understanding of her behavior that her low self-esteem and low relational value led her to binge to attempt to increase her self-esteem as well as to feel “more valued”; thus increasing her perceived relational value. A fifth participant reported that she felt that when she was binge drinking she was able to “stop over thinking” which led her to feel more “confident” and have increased self-esteem, so that she would systematically choose to binge consume alcohol with the intention of increasing her self-esteem. The same participant disclosed an awareness of a connection between her self-esteem and her perceived relational value in that she reported that she would drink alcohol to increase her relational value which would result in increases in her level of self-esteem as well. All themes are contained in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Participant demographic information.

Variable	n (%)	Mean	SD
Age			
22	2 (40)	22.8	0.837
23	2 (40)		
24	1 (20)		
	5 (100)		
Gender			
Female	5 (100)		
Male	0 (0)		
	5 (100)		
Racial/Ethnic category			
White	3 (60)		
African american	1 (20)		
Hispanic	1 (20)		
	5 (100)		

Academic class status	
Sophomore	1 (20)
Junior	2 (40)
1 <sup>st</sup> year graduate	1 (20)
2 <sup>nd</sup> year graduate	1 (20)
	5 (100)

The outcome results of the present study indicated that young adults’ level of self-esteem was associated with engagement in binge drinking in young adults. Through an exploration of self-esteem and relational value, there was some evidence of a cyclical pattern between reasons for engaging in a binge and then a binge perpetuating those same reasons. There was also some indication that there was a conscious awareness of the relationship between self-esteem and bingeing behavior.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study were evaluated as they related to literature and theory. The first research question posed by the researcher focused on how the young adults felt their level of self-esteem related to their behavioral attempts to increase their relational value. In gathering information regarding their feelings, evidence emerged that the participants believed that their experience of low self-esteem led them to engage in the binge consumption of alcohol; additionally, it seemed that a cyclical nature of the causes and effects of bingeing behavior was evident as well. Additionally, the present research also showed evidence that indicated that a conscious awareness of the relationship between self-esteem and relational value existed.

### Low self-esteem led to binge drinking

The present research indicated that low levels of self-esteem lead to binge drinking in the young adult participants. Four of the five young adults interviewed within the study indicated that low levels of self-esteem had led them to engage in the binge consumption of alcohol and that they had consciously decided to binge drink with the goal of increasing their level of self-esteem. Existing literature in the field exploring SMT indicates that the sociometer does serve an indicative function in that it does in fact serve as a tracking device to monitor an individual’s level of social acceptance. The present study supported not only the indicative function of the sociometer but that this sociometer does in fact trigger behavioral change in that in the present sample of young adults, low relational value signaled by low self-esteem promoted behavioral change for all participants in the study.

### Causes and effects of bingeing behavior were cyclical in nature

It appeared that just as low self-esteem and negative emotionality are reportedly reasons why young adults engage in binge drinking behavior; it seems that both of these experiences seem to be consequences of the binges as well. Two of the participants indicated that they are cognizant of the cyclical nature of their incentive to

binge being the same as the consequences of their binges. One reported that feelings of sadness led her to want to begin a drinking episode that escalates into a binge and another noted that if she wanted to feel more confident she would binge drink, but that binge drinking had caused her to gain a substantial amount of weight which had led her have lower levels of self-esteem. Existing literature provided vast evidence that low self-esteem and negative emotionality is related to engagement in binge drinking behaviors, particularly when trying to increase self-esteem by trying to increase relational value [3,12,14-20,28]. However, neither SMT nor existing literature have provided a proposal regarding the outcome of binge consumption of alcohol aimed at increasing self-esteem or coping with negative emotionality. Thus, the initial aim of bingeing to either cope or gain confidence is supported by existing literature but research evidence is lacking regarding the effects of bingeing for these purposes thus the cyclical nature of the bingeing behavior is not evident in existing literature.

### **There was a conscious awareness of the relationship between self-esteem and relational value**

A theme of conscious awareness of the relationship between self-esteem and relational value became evident to support the conclusion that the young adults within the present sample were consciously aware of the impact of their self-esteem on behavioral attempts to increase their perceived relational value. Four of the five young adults reported that both their low self-esteem and low relational value was associated with binge drinking behavior. In addition to this, there existed some indication of a conscious connection between self-esteem and relational value in the reports of two of the participants. This finding supports newly developing ideas within the existing literature that suggest that individuals' feelings about themselves are impacted by others' perceptions of them [17]. Existing literature posits that if self-perceptions are impacted by the perceptions of others, this would serve as support for the concept of conscious awareness of relational value [6,17]. Researchers in the field have proposed this [17], yet existing research findings have yet to definitively support the existence of this conscious awareness [17]. However, the findings of the current study suggest that participants in this study did have a conscious awareness of relational value.

The second research question that focused on the exploration of the experience of the young adults associated with their internal cognitive processes regarding their self-esteem and their attempts to increase their relational value. In gathering data regarding the lived experience of the young adults in the sample; a theme of a conscious awareness of the young adults' cognitive processes about their attempts to increase their self-esteem surfaced.

### **There was a conscious awareness of the cognitive processes regarding attempts to increase self-esteem**

A theme of the conscious awareness of the cognitive processes regarding attempts to increase self-esteem emerged as support for the outcome that there was a conscious awareness of the relationship between self-esteem and bingeing behavior. This was supported within the present study by the notion of all of the participants reported being cognizant of a connection between their self-esteem and their attempts to increase their relational value. It is proposed that individuals' feelings about themselves are impacted by others' perceptions of them, this could signify a conscious awareness of relational value, though research has not

yet definitively proven this to be true [6,17]. The present study does support the existence of the conscious awareness of relational value in that two of the participants reported a conscious awareness of connection between their self-esteem and their perceived relational value. Existing research regarding SMT goes further to suppose that the impact of self-perceived relational value impacts self-esteem which would validate the assumption that there is a portion of the sociometer that operates within conscious awareness [17]. The present study shows that four of the participants indicated conscious awareness of their relational value as it impacted their bingeing behavior. All participants were aware of the internal cognitive processes regarding their self-esteem and either attempts to increase their self-esteem by increasing relational value or their conscious attempts to binge to feel better about themselves. Additionally, the present study provided support for the idea that a portion of the sociometer operates within conscious awareness. The theme is consistent with theory; SMT posits that the impact of self-perceived relational value impacts self-esteem which would validate the assumption that there is a portion of the sociometer that operates within conscious awareness [17]. The present study expanded upon the existing literature regarding SMT by gathering information about the portion of the sociometer that operates within the young adults' conscious awareness and supporting the claim by providing evidence for the impact of perceived relational value on behavior.

The interpretation of the results could potentially be influenced by a number of factors. It was assumed that the participants were independent and were sharing honest and truthful information; however, due to the use of interviews to gather information, credibility of the results may be limited as the participants may have felt compelled to give socially desirable responses. Additionally, the utilization of a purposive sample of young adults living in the same geographic location and attending the same university, assumed that the participants were representative of the greater population of young adults. Though, it is important to consider is that this purposive sample could have potentially impact the results.

The use of a purposive sample that consisted of only young adult females would potentially impact the interpretation of the results as well. The results of the present study indicate that the sample demonstrated conformity in alcohol consumption as well as a sense of thwarted belongingness. Existing literature indicates that female college students tend to show increased alcohol consumption conformity as compared to males [13,30]. Additionally, research indicates that females may be more sensitive to thwarted belongingness than males as well [31]. Though five males took part in the screening process, none of them qualified for participation; this may have been impacted by the screening questions, the manner in which the screening questions were asked or that the males simply did not qualify because there were not as sensitive to the experience of thwarted belongingness or demonstrating alcohol consumption conformity as the females were.

Additionally, the sample contained young adults on the upper end of the age range and contained no one under the legal drinking age of 21. It is possible that the outcome of the results might have been impacted if younger or underage adults were given the opportunity to make disclosures in a more anonymous way within the screening and interview process. Also, having used a researcher developed screening tool may have impacted the outcome. Had existing, previously developed measures been used, the sample may have been different.

There are limitations within the present research design. It is possible that the participants may have felt the need to consider the social desirability of their answers, which would limit the credibility of the results [32]. This remains a potential limitation despite the fact that the researcher took steps to increase the likelihood of honesty by assuring the participants of the confidentiality of their responses, that there were no correct or incorrect answers and that there were no consequences based on their answer [32]. To establish confirmability the researcher utilized triangulation to help control against bias [33,34]. The researcher used triangulation to establish dependability as well. The transferability of the results may also be limited by the use of a purposive sample of individuals from a similar geographic location [22,33]. Though not a part of the inclusion criteria, all were students and located on the campus of the same educational institution.

It has been recognized that the life-stage of young adulthood is one in which there is an increased focus on one's relational value, which can result in increased susceptibility to peer influence; thus, these individuals possess an increased tendency to engage in conformity behaviors characterized as maladaptive with the intent of increasing their relational value [7-13,35]. The findings of the present study have expanded upon the existing research regarding SMT to shed light on the portion of the sociometer that operates within conscious awareness.

## CONCLUSION

The participants' descriptions of their lived experiences provided evidence supporting the conscious awareness of the relationship between self-esteem and relational value which supports existence of the conscious portion of the sociometer that motivates behavior in response to low self-esteem signaling decreased relational value. SMT suggests an explanation of the sociometer and how it influences one's self-esteem; however, there is not a clear understanding of the portion of the sociometer that operates within the individual's conscious awareness to impact one's behavior. Consequently, an exploration of the role of behavior as it relates to self-esteem and social acceptance was essential to gain an understanding of these attempts to increase self-esteem and relational value in the population of young adult.

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